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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: REFERENDUM CALLED "HISTORIC" BY GOVERNMENT MEDIA;
SATELLITE TV AND WEBSITES FOCUS ON VIOLENCE: EGYPTIAN
MEDIA THEMES, MAY 23 TO 30

1. May 25 referendum on constitutional amendment to change presidential election process - TV: Egyptian TV coverage showed enthusiastic voters casting their ballots and praising President Mubarak and the referendum throughout May 25. "We now have true democracy in Egypt and thanks to our President!" exclaimed an elderly woman on Channel 1. On the flip side, Egyptians saw coverage on CNN and Al Arabiya on May 25 and 26 showing pro-government demonstrators beating opposition Kifaya ("Enough") protesters. Al Arabiya's May 26 report focused on female demonstrators who were publicly beaten by pro-government demonstrators. Al Jazeera showed footage of a ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) rally, followed by an on-the-street interview with NDP Secretary General Safwat El Sherif and a man critical of the referendum, and images of empty polling stations. While Al Jazeera reported on the violence against opposition demonstrators, it showed no images.

2. May 25 referendum print press: The front pages of the pro-government press on May 26 led with headlines praising Egypt's "historic referendum" and with photos of Mubarak and leading NDP members casting their ballots. However, English-language weekly Cairo Magazine published on May 26 photos of Kifaya demonstrators beaten by pro-government demonstrators, along with reports that "pro-Mubarak demonstrators, apparently led by NDP officials, were young men and boys from lower income neighborhoods. Some admitted to reporters that they had received incentives to participate, including LE20, a quarter-portion of grilled chicken and a soft drink." (Note: LE20 20 Egyptian pounds amounts to \$3.50 U.S. End note.) Several Egyptian and western media contacts noted to PA officer that the May 25 organized violence against female protestors was the first they had seen or heard of in Egypt. "The referendum was one step forward, and another step backward," stated one Egyptian reporter, who writes for a pro-government newspaper.

3. May 25 referendum - commentary: Opposition Al Wafd (circulation: 180,000) continued its critical commentary on the referendum, calling it "undemocratic" and criticizing the NDP for its "bullying of the Egyptian people" in May 29 commentaries. Commentary in the pro-government press praised the referendum, though pro-government Al Ahram (circulation: 750,000) did publish on May 29 a column by reformer Salama Ahmed Salama who criticized the government for its "rigidity" and the arrest of demonstrators also and the pro-government media for failing to have been "neutral and impartial." Meanwhile on the Internet, Egyptian weblog writers bloggers reported on and were critical of the referendum violence. On May 26 the author of "The Arabist Network" blog (found online at arabist.net) posted images of Kifaya demonstrators being beaten at the Journalists' Syndicate and reported on empty downtown polling stations, commenting: "One thing is for sure Egypt looked bad."

4. First Lady Laura Bush visits Egypt: The First Lady's May 23-24 visit to Egypt garnered front page coverage in the pro-government press and TV, with her remarks praising Mubarak and his government for democratic reforms dominating headlines on May 24. Few commentaries about the First Lady's visit were published. Writing about her visit on May 29, a commentator in Al Ahram repeated the oft-heard mantra that "the image of the U.S. will not be improved unless it changes its policy towards the Palestinians and Iraq," while praising the First Lady's statements during her visit to Egypt as "frank and honest."

GRAY